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Books of The Times

By CHARLES POORE

A GOOD book about real espionage must do two things. First it must tell us that spying is a matter of infinite drudgery seldom adorned by beautifully landscaped Mata Haris. Then it must reveal a fair quantity of astounding actual sleuthery involving the fates of nations.

It's got to do both things simultaneously if it's going to have many customers outside the trade-school ranks. Otherwise the inconstant reader will turn toward livelier avenues of crime and punishment.

Such as? Well, to be specific, he—and she—will turn from the Ian Fleming who wrote the introduction to H. Montgomery Hyde's "Room 3603,"* our book for today, to the Ian Fleming who writes the admirably lurid thrillers starring James Bond, the toughest and blindest of crime-busters drilled on the playing fields of Eton, or thereabouts.

Now a book about an important subject, as we say from time to time, is not necessarily an important book. But "Room 3603" is an important book about an important subject: the tremendous British security operation in America during World War II. Mr. Hyde is the author of many books on British politics and history.

The operation called British Security Co-ordination—or B.S.C.—was run by a brilliant Canadian millionaire, Sir William Stephenson, and "Room 3603," his wartime address in Rockefeller Center, is essentially Sir William's story.

Glory Shared by Cynthia

At the end of the war President Harry S. Truman decorated Sir William with the Medal of Merit, King George VI made him a knight and he received fine commendations from J. Edgar Hoover, Maj. Gen. Wild Bill Donovan, Robert E. Sherwood and other high colleagues in keeping the Free Word free—including Hugh Dalton, who was by then Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Is there a Mata Hari in the story? No. But there is a remarkable agent named Cynthia—need I add that was not her real name?—the charmed susceptible men famously. She supplied our side with the texts of just about all the telegrams that went into and out of the Vichy Embassy in Washington and helped to crack the Vichy and Italian naval codes.

*"Room 3603. By H. Montgomery Hyde. Foreword by Ian Fleming. 287 pages. Farrar, \$4.50.

"As her story unfolds," Mr. Hyde classically remarks, "it will become apparent that her peculiar feminine charms were the real instrument of her success. And yet, remarkably enough, she had no very obvious sexual allure."

Oh, didn't she? Let the reader judge as he reads gratefully about Cynthia in respite from many a page proving to the hilt that international rivalry never quite ceases even when the nations concerned are allies striving for survival.

Or even within nations at war, for that matter. For example, Sir William was perhaps more surprised than pleased when in the summer of 1942 a Political Warfare Mission from London, headed by Sir David Bowes-Lyon, a brother of the Queen, arrived in America to take over some of Sir William's operations. Organizational empire building within the Empire did not seem cricket to Sir William and he used his right of appeal strenuously.

He carried on and confounded the enemy's knavish tricks and confused the enemy's politics. Considerable use was made of information obtained by opening Axis mail in Bermuda. When the United States, after a longish interval, entered the war, Sir William's organization helped to train operatives for the Office of Strategic Services and other unusual warriors.

Other Potent Influences

A Hungarian astrologer who had defected from Hitler's court was brought to the United States "to shake American public confidence in the invincibility of Adolf Hitler," according to Mr. Hyde.

This arcane maneuver may have been suggested by the immense popularity in wartime Britain of the astrological prophecies of Michel Nostradamus (1532-66) that perhaps helped to dispel the lingering vapors of Munich.

Sir William played an important part in ordering full steam ahead on the investigation—toward the end of World War II—of the Soviet spy apparatus fostered by Igor Gouzenko that led to the ultimate 1946 conviction at the Old Bailey of Dr. Alan Nunn May.

One of Sir William's secret weapons is recalled by Ian Fleming who reveals that the man in Room 3603 tried to make the most powerful machine in America and serve them in quiet.

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